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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques and comments on symposium presentations focused on issues related to parent involvement in educational activities and the schools. Although bureaucratic agencies have become important influences on education, recognition is growing that the family has a primary role in training and educating children. The involvement of parents and other community members in schools nas been found tc show a measurable effect upon student achievement. Three main directions for improving family-school relationships in ways likely to develop productive environments for learning are as follows: (1) the curriculum should be conceived not as a printed course of study but as an environment for learning: (2) analysis of parents' and teachers' assumptions can result in the formation of assumptions that facilitate parent and teacher ccoperation: and (3) following this anlaysis parents and teachers can be teamed for collaboration in building learning environments. A major problem impeding the development of curricula through which the family and the school reinforce each other is the increasing separation of families and schools. Families seek privacy and schools become increasingly bureaucratic and resistant to outside influences. In the final analysis, the goal of parent-school cooperation is continuity, not identity, between home and school. (Author/RH)

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Parent Involvement in Curriculum Decision-Making: Critique and Comment

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There is much current discussion of parent and community involvement in education but very little analysis and interpretation of the several kinds of involvement and the problems encountered in achieving their goals. The papers presented in this symposium fill an important need. They identify different kinds of involvement, suggest the significant contributions that can be made when parents, teachers, principals and students seek to develop environments in home, community and school that will stimulate and guide the constructive learning of children and youth. Furthermore, they identify and describe some of the misperceptions of parents and school personnel that commonly impede or prevent effective parent-school cooperation. In contrast to many current discussions of school-community involvement the three presentations complement and supplement each other rather than debating divergent views.

The Perspective of History

Fantini reminds us that community, particularly parent involvement in education, is deep-rooted in our history. He did not deal at length with the long and slow evolution of the role of the individual family's right to participate in

educational decisions. Looking back to the Colonial Period in America one gains some perspective on this gradual development. At that time, the Acts of the English Parliament required every individual to live within the discipline of some family or surrogate family. These Acts enjoined all families to see to the proper religious and vocational training of ther members. An educational configuration had developed of household, church and school. The household carried the largest share of the responsibility for the training and education of children, but the specifications of the training and education were laid down by the state, and to some extent, by the church. Families, as such, had no place in deciding what children were to learn and how education and training were to be carried on.

When the United States was founded, the educational responsibilities were still borne by families and schools but the electorate through school boards and committees replaced Parliament and the church as the source of decisions. At the local level, the accepted traditions reinforced by the views of the majority of the community furnished the chief basis for decisions about schooling and the education of children. A consensus among this majority could and often did override decisions by school personnel but only in the last quarter century has there been a clear movement toward involving minorities and individual families in curriculum decision-making.

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Another important development in the two centuries of the Nation's life has been the shifting of more and more responsibilities on to the school. As noted above, in the Colonial Period in America, the family was held responsible for training and educating their children. In some colonies, schools were established but their primary role was to teach reading, writing, and reckoning, as arithmetic was then called. But in the early years of the nation, new educational purposes developed. The educational requirements for producing an enlightened citizenry were discussed and debated. The result was the assignment, either explicitly or implicitly, to the school the task of teaching citizenship. This was followed over the years by the shifting of many responsibilities from the family to the school.

In the early years, much of the expanding role of the school was mandated by legislation that responded to the recognition of new specialized educational tasks. In 1917, for example, the shortage of skilled workers in the First World War, stimulated the passage by the Congress of the Smith-Hughes Act authorizing federal financial assistance to states that would undertake vocational training in their high schools. More recently, however, the pressure for the school's expanding role has partly resulted from the changed situations in families. The Civil Rights movement brought to public attention the inadequacy of many homes in providing the conditions thought to be essential for educational achievement. Pressures developed for the establishment of

pre-schools to furnish professional services for young children. It was thought that these would make up for the perceived parental limitations. Many compensatory programs for children combine education for mothers with that of the children. The effect of these efforts has been to cast doubt on the practices and the wisdom of parents in rearing their children and providing for their education, and it has been relatively easy to get support for the recommendation that public agencies take over family responsibilities for training and education. But, the substitution of bureaucratic agency, whether it be school, day-care centers, or some other one, for the family will rarely furnish the physical, intellectual and emotional support and encouragement essential to the full development of children. This is an article of faith but it is also being supported by research in several disciplines. The recognition of the primary role of the family in training and educating children is basic to this symposium. The problem is not how to reduce the family's influence on education, but how the family, the community and the school can together strengthen their own capacities to provide the rich environments needed for the full growth and development of children.

Kinds of Involvement

Fantini's classification of parent and community participation in schooling is very helpful in distinguishing purpose and probable outcome of different types of involvement. The participation by citizens in school governance is essential in order to maintain the control of public institutions by

the people, and helps to prevent the so-called "Tyranny of the Expert." However, he finds little evidence from research that this kind of involvement has a direct effect on the learning of students.

The participation, as consumers, by parents, employers, and other citizens in continued appraisal of the school has the effect of increasing the consciousness of school personnel that they are accountable to the public for the quality of their products, that is, the educational attainments of their students. Without this sense of continuing public evaluation, schools could become irresponsible. Again, however, Fantini finds no research evidence to indicate the direct effect of such participation upon the learning of the students.

The participation by parents as employees of the school, paraprofessionals and the like, can be justified in terms of the opportunities such employment could provide the few who are involved to learn about school practices and to be stimulated to seek to learn more about schools and education. But again, he finds no evidence to suggest that the effect of this type of participation upon student learning is more than the effects obtained by employing additional school personnel whether or not they are parents.

When parents and other community members are involved in the school in direct efforts to improve the learning of the students, the research evidence is more conclusive. This kind of participation, Fantini finds, does show a measurable effect upon student achievement, and this conclusion leads naturally into the second paper in the symposium.

Producing Effective Learning Environments

Sinclair and Ghory begin their presentation with the statement of an implied problem. "Although parents and teachers have collective responsibility for the education of children, seldom do they share a grip on family and school environments that can tap the potential all children have for learning." To deal with this problem, they suggest three main directions for improving family-school relationships that are likely to develop productive environments for learning.

The first direction is to conceive of the curriculum not as a printed course of study but as environments for learning that which is important for children to learn who are growing up in today's world. Such a conception helps one to realize that the family, the community and the school are all providing environments and these can be examined and, where necessary, be transformed to become environments for productive learning. A second direction is to examine the assumptions, often unstated which guide parents and teachers to counterproductive efforts, and to substitute for these negative assumptions new ones to be used for forming closer associations. The third direction is to follow a proposed design for teaming parents and teachers that would encourage both groups to collaborate in building complementary learning environments for elementary school children.

These three directions appear to be soundly based. The curriculum in its broadest sense can be best conceived as

both the ends and means of education, and the environments in which children learn have imbedded within them both the ends--things to be learned--and the means--the experiences which stimulate, guide and reinforce the learning. It is also useful to note that the curriculm as expressed--in written or oral descriptions--is not identical with what the learner perceives regarding the means and ends of his learning. Hence, the importance of considering the implied, as well as the expressed curriculum and recognition that out of such examination of the expressed and implied, teachers and parents can work to make the environments for learning more effective. The result is called the emergent curriculum.

This treatment of curriculum, as I view it, has a certain limitation. It does not deal directly with one of the important problems of schooling: What should students be helped to learn? This is a significant issue of concern to parents as well as teachers and the public. It can be included in the term environments for learning since an adequate description of an environment for learning should indicate what is being learned as well as the conditions for the learning. No doubt Sinclair and Ghory recognize the need to be clear about the ends of education in designing environments for learning, but I suspect that some of the readers will think of environments solely in terms of their potential in encouraging learning and overlook the importance of focusing on ends that are important enough to justify cooperative efforts to achieve them.

Their identification of four major assumptions that impede or prevent cooperation between parents and teachers in developing effective curricula is an excellent analysis of stumbling blocks in cooperation and the four new assumptions they propose are very helpful in guiding the planning and development of productive cooperation.

Finally, Sinclair and Ghory outline a plan for facilitating and guiding teaming of parents and teachers. There are four phases to the plan: (1) Building a shared platform of educational values and expectations that will shape the settings for learning they create. (2) Diagnosing a child's learning needs and characteristics to determine favorable curriculum conditions, (3) Planning and implementing environments that will make desired learning possible. (4) Evaluating the effectiveness of the learning environments that are created in families and in schools.

These four phases all seem to me to be constructive, essential and important but the paper may give the reader the impression that each phase should be completed before undertaking the next. The diagram in the text, however, shows these phases as parts of a continuing cycle. My experience would emphasize this continuing nature of each phase. As parents, teachers and other community members become involved in seeking to improve the education of children the initial period will be one of hesitation. Shyness, possible distrust, lack of confidence, sense of powerlessness, sense of limited experience in the other

arena are all likely to make the initial encounters brief, concentrating on manifest problems or opportunities and requiring limited self-revelation.

Each meeting will furnish additional opportunities for clarifying values and goals and sharing where possible but recognizing differences and respecting them. Similarly, diagnoses will be continuing and hopefully, with increasing insight. Obviously the planning will improve with each cycle as experience and evaluation indicate where plans need improvement and suggest new opportunities for making environments productive. The general description Sinclair and Ghony give of these four phases will be very useful to those groups working on plans for helpful cooperation.

Misperceptions of Parents and Teachers

Lightfoot's comprehensive and sensitive analysis of family and school environments reveals both constructive possibilities and serious problems in developing more productive learning environments for children. As she puts it: "To fully capture family-school interactions, families need to be seen as educative environments where children experience their first and most profound curricular messages. Rather than ask how the family can become involved in the curriculum of the school, we might ask how the curricula of family and school could reinforce each other?"

A major problem impeding this kind of constructive cooperation is the increasing separation of the two-families and schools. Life in both settings seems to become increasingly guarded and inapproachable. Families seek privacy;

schools become increasingly more bureaucratic, more guarded and resistant to outside influences. Before progress is likely to be made in effective family-school cooperation, we need to search out the origins of conflicts and differences. An understanding of their background should make it easier to suggest ways in which these differences might be resolved or channeled into productive disagreements.

The identification of differences in structural properties, scope of relationships, and degree of affectivity helped me to see how easy it is for a teacher to be confused about the parent's role and the parent equally confused about several aspects of the teacher's role. The boundaries of responsibility are fuzzy and overlapping. This can often lead to struggles for clarity and boundary setting as parents argue about who should be in control of the child's life in school. She also points out that one reason why struggles over territoriality are rarely articulated, clarified and resolved is because there are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful substantive discussions. Scheduled occasions are ritualistic and do not allow for real contact and discussions in depth while individualized reactions are rare and usually specifically requested.

Lightfoot's sensitive and sympathetic description of the feelings and perceptions of many lower class parents is an important contribution to our understanding of problems likely to be faced in developing genuine cooperation. Their

sense of being excluded and of being powerless and their perception of teachers as having little concern for their children not only help to explain common situations but also suggest kinds of efforts that can be undertaken to reduce these negative feelings. She is careful to state that each local situation can have unique aspects, hence her general descriptions should serve to initiate special inquiries in each school and community in order to understand the origins and the nature of misperceptions there.

She also makes an important point in emphasizing the goal as continuity in the educational environment of family and school and not identity. A certain necessary difference is important to maintain; the school environment should provide an arena for the child that is different from that of the home, but the learning should not be in conflict. Furthermore, the goals we seek can only be realized when there is trust, accountability and responsibility shared between families, communities and schools.

In Conclusion

The subject of this symposium is Parent Involvement in Curriculum Decision Making. The three papers have helped us to distinguish involvement in curriculum decision-making from other kinds of parent participation. Some research evidence has been presented to indicate that parent involvement in direct efforts to improve student learning can help to increase educational achievement.

They have also outlined directions to take that are likely to bring about productive environments in home and school. We have been reminded however, that in many communities families and schools have become separated and they are not easily brought together to develop jointly better educational environments. The challenge is clear: We can begin now to bring about the trusting relationships required for successful efforts to improve the learning of our children through the developing continuity in the home and school environment.